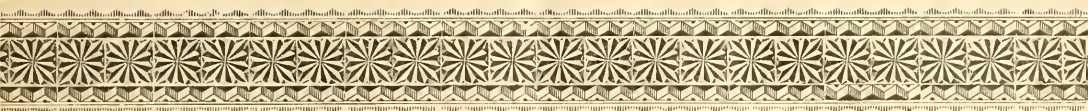


821



Abraham Lincoln.

KANSAS COMMANDERY
OF THE
MILITARY ORDER OF THE LOYAL LEGION
OF THE UNITED STATES.

WAR PAPER No. 20.



ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

A P A P E R

Prepared and Read Before the Kansas Commandery
of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion
of the United States.

—BY—

COMPANION MAJ. J. G. ROWLAND,

10th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, Governor Western National Military Home.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from

The Institute of Museum and Library Services through an Indiana State Library LSTA Grant

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

Read before the Kansas Commandery, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, May 3, 1900, by Major J. G. ROWLAND, Tenth Illinois Volunteer Infantry, Governor Western National Military Home.

COMPANIONS:—We who have lived in the past half century have seen such a wonderful development in every department of human effort that we have become accustomed to a growth—an advancement—which is in fact phenomenal.

We do not realize what a change has taken place in the status of the individual citizen, as well as in our strength and importance as a nation, and what has been accomplished in all that can make men wiser, better and happier, until we compare the conditions of fifty years ago with the conditions now.

The great man who was most influential in bringing about these changes in our own country, in establishing political liberty, and in securing vigorous national life—one whom we all revere—stands conspicuously above all, a figure, heroic and simple; grand, yet unadorned; the homespun lawyer of the prairies; the martyred President, Abraham Lincoln.

Thirty-five years ago the great tragedy which shocked the world took him from life. It is a fitting time, near the anniversary of that grievous loss, to remember him anew, to dwell upon his great deeds, to recall his lovable traits, and his eminent, if homely, personality.

Abraham Lincoln was born a poor boy, of humble parentage. His home was in the wilderness, a cabin of the pioneer type, rough and primitive.

Referring to the coming of his father's second wife, a late writer says of Abraham, when he was about eleven years old: "When he crept down from the garret where he slept on his mattress of dried leaves, under his blanket of skins, stepping cautiously upon the pegs driven into the wall, (the only steps which led from his loft chamber) his glance lit one morning upon the rosy, kindly face of the good step-mother." Consider the picture thus presented of his boyhood life; of the crude surroundings of his early years. Here we realize that he was among the poorest of the poor boys of the backwoods type; that he lived as did the commonest of "the common people."

His education was confined to attendance at the log school houses near his home, the whole period being less than one year, and as some authorities state, only a few months.

As he advanced in years his employments were those of a wood-chopper, an ordinary farm hand; and for a while a boatman on the Mississippi; but after he became of age he was more ambitious. He studied law, and gave his attention to politics, and was elected to the Legislature when he was twenty-five years old.

I have thus briefly alluded to his earlier life. My purpose chiefly, is to deal with his maturer years and his career of eminence and national import.

Continuing in politics, Mr. Lincoln was elected to Congress in 1846, and he took a prominent part as a candidate for the Senate of the United States, for the vice-presidential nomination, and as head of the electoral ticket during the ensuing ten years. He had now become a leading debater on the stump and was acquiring a national reputation, which the fame of his great joint discussion with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858 permanently secured.

I was present with thousands of interested auditors at one of these great debates. The contrast between the contestants was remarkable. Each in a different way, possessed physical and mental traits that rendered him conspicuous above the average man. Physically they were as widely separated as comparison would suggest. Lincoln, very tall and angular, with methodical and deliberate speech, depended on forceful logic and the effect of plain truths plainly stated. His arguments appealed strongly to plain people.

Douglas, quite a short and stout man with a powerful, resonant bass voice that could be distinctly heard by every one in the vast assemblage, was a fiery and impetuous speaker, and was quick to seize a plausible argument and drive it into men's comprehension with sledge hammer blows. Each had his enthusiastic adherents and the excitement was continuous throughout the struggle between these forensic giants. To the immortal credit of Douglas, when the time of trouble came, he bravely faced the storm of secession and warmly supported his old antagonist, publishing far and wide his noted saying, "In this crisis there can be only two parties, patriots and traitors."

This notable debate brought Lincoln to the front for the Presidential nomination by the Republican party in 1860, in which he succeeded, and his election to the Presidency followed.

It was my good fortune to be in Springfield on the day when Mr. Lincoln left for Washington, February 11, 1861. It was quite early in the morning, when by chance I made one of a small crowd that wit-

nessed his departure. Standing near him, as he stepped upon the platform of the car, I heard him deliver that pathetic farewell speech, which, little appreciated as it was at the time, became so famous afterward. Nothing could be more touching and tender than his reference to the lost child whose grave he was leaving—separating himself from that little mound, as he did from all the good neighbors and kind friends to whom he was endeared by long association.

Feeling keenly the responsibilities of his position he said: "I go to assume a task more difficult than that which devolved upon Washington." How prophetically did he speak of the great trials in store for him!

On my return to the hotel, I told some members of the Legislature, then in session, several of whom became prominent afterward in national affairs, of my having heard Mr. Lincoln's parting speech, and what he said. They were disposed, even his party associates, to make light of his grave fears, and his opponents ridiculed the idea that he had before him as difficult a task as was imposed upon Washington. How little did they appreciate the crisis. How blind they were to the coming horrors of the great war in which we were so soon involved.

This hurried sketch of Mr. Lincoln's history brings us to the threshold of the great important era of his life; and here commences a trying experience as full of the worry of dangerous and critical situations as any public man has ever encountered.

I do not know of any portion of Mr. Lincoln's career which so awakens a deep interest in him; which so appeals to our sympathy—not even the sad story of his martyred death, for then he was beyond the reach of suffering—as does that period of intense mental strain for two months following his inauguration. He had seized the helm when the good ship of state was drifting upon rocks of treachery. He was alone in the midst of his great trials—almost without a strong friend in Washington—with spies and schemers and open enemies swarming about him. There was scarcely a single Union musket or saber to defend the Capital. Men of the South were threatening and defiant, and the Border States trembling in the balance. With a constant menace that the Capital would fall into the enemy's hands and the cause of liberty receive its death blow at the very beginning of the struggle, can we conceive of a deeper degree of care and solicitude than bore its heavy hand upon Abraham Lincoln in the supreme hour of his life? Times there were thereafter in the anxious moments of undecided battle, in the issue of hazardous campaigns, in the difficulties engendered by jealous officers, in the thousand exigencies of war, that sorely tried Lincoln's faith and spirit and courage. But he never faltered in his

confidence in ultimate victory after the people of the North were once fairly aroused and the march of blue legions to the front in countless thousands convinced him of the unyielding patriotism of the loyal States.

Until recent history has enlightened them, the American people have not realized what a debt of gratitude they owe Lincoln. How their salvation rested in the exercise of his keen knowledge of human nature in dealing with individuals, and his grand wisdom in handling the gravest and most intricate matters of governmental policy. It would demand a volume's space to enlarge upon the details of that magnificent battle which he fought for American liberty, almost single-handed and with little support but his own native tact and talent, and his grand courage, in the dark hours of March and April, 1861.

Moving further along in the path of history we find the same unexampled wisdom in the management of the border State question which was of such serious import in the early days of the war. In the course of time, as his wise judgment dictated was the opportune moment, he issued his great Proclamation of Emancipation, freeing millions of slaves and causing a thrill of joy and hope in the hearts of a down-trodden race.

Time will not permit me to follow Lincoln's career throughout the war, or to attempt even a summary of the many critical periods of that momentous struggle, in which he was always at the front with the firm hand, to do the best, as his wisdom directed, and to shape the tide of events, that victory came at last. What a sad thought it is that he never realized the fruition of his triumph; that ere the echoes of the victorious drums and the joyful notes of exultant bugles, celebrating the fall of treason, and the ascendancy of the old flag, had died away, his spirit had taken its departure to the world beyond. Yet, who can tell? May not his spiritual eye, calm and placid and tender, as with mortal vision in the days on earth, have looked down in quiet satisfaction on the strife ended—the peace secured—the victory won?

The character and disposition of Abraham Lincoln have been the theme of many a pen and many a household story. Endowed as he was by nature with great strength of intellect, enabling him to take no second position among the best and most cultivated minds of America, yet it was his warm and sympathetic heart, his kindly and genial disposition, his homely wit and innocent humor, his humanity, his consideration for others, that endeared him to his countrymen.

A Springfield friend of Lincoln's told me the following story of him, which is grandly characteristic of the man: In the most trying

days of the war he was strolling down Pennsylvania Avenue one evening in company with one of his old and intimate friends from Illinois. Lincoln was somewhat anxious and depressed, for there appeared at times a strange melancholic vein in his temperament. He felt grievously the overpowering responsibility of his position, and some special care of the moment rested oppressively upon his mind. The two friends walked slowly along in silence, when suddenly a man stepped in front of the President, and presenting a paper, said: "Mr. Lincoln, this is the only opportunity I have had to speak to you; please consider my case. I —" Here Mr. Lincoln interrupted him impatiently, and said: "My man, don't annoy me in this way; I have too much to think of; you must let me alone," and passed on with his companion, leaving the applicant standing dejectedly on the sidewalk. The two friends walked a short distance without speaking, when suddenly Mr. Lincoln stopped and said: "John, I treated that man shamefully; I must go back and see him." And he at once turned and walked up to the petitioner, who had remained in his despondent attitude. "My friend," said Mr. Lincoln, "I was rude to you just now; I ask your pardon. I have a great deal to worry and trouble me at this time, but I had no right to treat you so uncivilly. Take this card, and come to my office in the morning, and I will do what I can for you. Good night." And he rejoined his friend to resume his melancholy manner, and silently they walked on as before.

His practical wit was often shown, and I will quote a recently told illustration of it. On one occasion, as he passed through an assemblage, a rough fellow remarked: "There goes a common looking man." Lincoln stopped, and turning around, said, quietly: "My friend, the Lord loves common looking people; that's the reason he made so many of them."

One day, in 1862, a gentleman from some Northern city entered Mr. Lincoln's private office, and earnestly requested a pass to Richmond. "A pass to Richmond!" exclaimed the President. "Why, my dear sir, if I gave you one it would do you no good. You may think it very strange, but there is a lot of fellows between here and Richmond who either can't read or are prejudiced against every man who comes from me. I have given McClellan, and more than 200,000 others, permission to go into Richmond, and not a single one of 'em has got there yet."

Multitudes of anecdotes are told of his leniency to his enemies, his inclination to pardon deserters, and those who had been condemned by court martial for grave offenses. His general officers and associates, especially the iron-willed Stanton, were sometimes impatient with him for what they claimed was a mistaken policy,

an unwise over-ruling of authority subversive of discipline. A typical instance was that of a young soldier who was condemned to be shot for sleeping on his post. Mr. Lincoln pardoned him and in doing so said: "What can you expect from a young fellow like that? He was probably raised a farmer's boy, accustomed to going to bed early and needing plenty of rest, and I will never consent to his execution for such an offense." It is reported that the dead body of this same young soldier was found on the bloody field of Fredericksburg and that under his vest suspended by a ribbon around his neck, was a photograph of the one who had saved him from an inglorious death, and upon it he had written, "God bless President Lincoln."

Safely could Abraham Lincoln rest upon that appeal to the disposer of all—"That mercy I to others show, that mercy show to me." Yet he could be firm when decision was required, and never did he urge any other than the most vigorous prosecution of the war.

But his heart went out in sympathy for all suffering and distress. He was intolerant only of the meaner vices of men. Ingratitude and hypocrisy and deceit and falsehood—intolerant in that his nobler nature condemned them; and yet he was never known to show vindictiveness toward any one, and when ill-treated, would rather ignore the insult than resent it. He seemed to be almost distinct from others in this respect; he subordinated all personal considerations to the grand purpose of his country's welfare, he allowed no petty feeling of anger or selfishness, or pride of position, to stand in the way of wisely meeting his great responsibilities. Calmly and steadily he moved along the path of duty, undisturbed by the trifles that annoy and irritate the generality of mankind.

It seemed to be one of the peculiar features of Abraham Lincoln's thought and expression, that while his oratory may not attract attention when uttered, it finds appreciation and compels admiration as time passes, and men reflect about it and study it. The address at Gettysburg is a case in point. When made, it was not realized that a grand production had been given to the world. Now, it shines as a gem in the English language. In eloquent pathos and tender beauty of sentiment, it is one of the noblest efforts of the orator. The singular beauty and power of the conclusion of this remarkable address, which can hardly be too often repeated, has given it a world wide fame:

"Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met upon a great battlefield of that war. We are met to dedicate a portion of it as the final resting place of those who have given their

lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a large sense we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work that they have thus far so nobly carried on. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us; that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to the cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that the nation shall, under God, have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

The recent war, in which our country has achieved so complete a victory, imposes upon us duties and responsibilities not dreamed of even a short time since. Yet may we not, in considering the startling change which has taken place in our position among the nations, recall the memorable words uttered at Gettysburg? May we not apply them to the profound obligations resting upon America in her new field of action as the champion of freedom, justice and good government for the people of the West India Islands and the Philippines? Are we to shrink from our accountability to the world and our duty to a mixed population of unenlightened people in the Pacific Islands because a treacherous tribe—a small minority of the inhabitants—led by unscrupulous adventurers, has assaulted the flag, attacked our soldiers, and resists our lawful authority?

We cannot in honor strike our flag in the face of unprovoked and armed opposition. First, let us suppress this uncalled for rebellion; then restore peace and order and enforce a regard for law; plant the little school houses and Christian churches upon the hills and plains of Luzon; begin an education of the people in the ways of good government, that they may be able to learn, if need be, how to maintain a republic if one be established, and when the accepted time comes, as it may soon come, the teacher and the preacher and the men active in the pursuits of peace will follow the soldier. We may well hope a nation will be created from the numerous tribes of the Philippines and a new foothold for liberty and progress be established, carrying influences for good to the far-away regions of the Asiatic world.

Are we to shirk the burden of responsibility which rests upon us by the march of events in God's providential ways? Should not the American people "highly resolve" that our dead soldiers of the Spanish war and the conflict in the Philippines shall not have died in vain? Let the grand words of Abraham Lincoln answer in para-

phrase: "This nation, under God, shall have a new allotment of duty, and government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall be extended to the uttermost parts of the earth."

Never was a man less understood, except by his intimates, than was Abraham Lincoln. He was a problem to Eastern men especially, unused as they were to the manner and expression that characterized the typical Western man of early days. Visitors were sometimes disappointed at what seemed to them disagreeable peculiarities; surprised at a jocularity incompatible with his high station, as they thought, and wondering at the lack of a stately dignity which had always been associated with the office of President. Then he was villified by continuous slander and misrepresentation; numbers of stories, such as no one should wish to repeat, were attributed to him, of which he was innocent.

Abraham Lincoln was a pure man; his life and habits are evidence of that; and a rough joke with him was never emphasized except for its point. Its mission was to drive home some truth of argument or belief. To this, he had from youth been accustomed.

There were no newspapers in the remote country neighborhood where he passed his earlier years, and very few books. Social amusements or entertainments were rare, and the chief resource of the men folk was to gather at the country store or blacksmith shop and talk of politics or happenings of the vicinity, or such scanty general news as could be obtained. Here the habit of story telling was acquired by Lincoln, and he became a veritable store-house of apt illustrations and rough diamond wit. The practice of reproducing some appropriate humorous story was ever afterwards a safety valve to relieve him of the pressure of official anxiety and care.

One of the best tributes to Lincoln, and one of the most deserved portrayals of his character, emanates from Emerson:

"A plain man of the people, an extraordinary fortune attended him. He offered no shining qualities at the first encounter; he did not offend by superiority. He had a face and manner which disarmed suspicion, which inspired confidence, which confirmed good will. He was a man without vices. He had a strong sense of duty, which it was very easy for him to obey. Then he had what farmers call a 'long head'; was excellent in working out the sum for himself, in arguing his case and convincing you fairly and firmly. He had a vast good nature, which made him tolerant and accessible to all. Then his broad, good humor, running easily into jocular talk, in which he delighted and in which he excelled, was a rich gift to this wise man. It enabled him to keep his secret, to meet every kind of man, and every rank in society; to mask his own purpose and to sound his companion, and to catch with true instinct the temper of every company he addressed. His occupying the chair of state was a triumph of the good sense of mankind and of the public conscience. This middle class country had gotten a middle class President at

last. Yes, in manner and sympathies, but not in powers, for his powers were superior. This man grew according to the need; his mind mastered the problem of the day, and as the problem grew so did his comprehension of it. Rarely was a man so fitted to the event. It cannot be said that there is any exaggeration of his worth. If ever a man was fairly tested, he was. There was no lack of resistance—no, nor of slander, nor of ridicule. Then what an occasion was the whirlwind of the war! Here was a place for no holiday magistrate, no fair-weather sailor. The new pilot was hurried to the helm in a tornado. In four years—four years of battle days, his endurance, his fertility of resources, his magnanimity were sorely tried, and never found wanting. There, by his courage, his justice, his even temper, his fertile council, his humanity, he stood—a heroic figure in the center of a heroic epoch."

The intense strain burdening his mind and spirits he endured almost throughout his entire term of office. It told upon him severely. There were times when his old friends were shocked with the change in his appearance. They had known him at his home and in the courts of Illinois, with a frame of iron and nerves of steel, as a man who hardly knew what illness was. Now they saw the wrinkles on his face deepen into furrows as anxiety, responsibility, and care and the injustice of friends wore upon and distressed him. He said one day: "I feel as though I shall never be glad again." On another occasion, after some bad news had come, he said; "How willingly would I exchange places with the soldier who sleeps on the ground in the army of the Potomac."

From Whittier, we have these lines:

"The weary form that rested not
Save in a martyr's grave:
The careworn face that none forgot,
Turned to the kneeling slave.

"We rest in peace where his sad eyes,
Saw peril, strife and pain:
His was the awful sacrifice,
And ours the priceless gain."

More than a third of a century has passed, my companions, since he who occupies our thought to-night was hurried into the life beyond by the hand of a wretched assassin. We may well take pride in the fact that he was our contemporary—that we were privileged to participate in the same struggle that engrossed his whole being, and it is for us, as time passes, to meet and often recall his memory—refresh our recollection of his grand achievements for his country, and remember that, civilian though he was, his was a soldier's patriotism, his was a bloody death, as dies the soldier in the hot rush of battle.

True to his country in her deepest need with service beyond all estimation, giving all that man could give in her behalf, what laurel

crowned chieftain deserves a richer chaplet? What victorious hero, glittering in the pomp and circumstance of war, has greater honors and reward?

The slave, freed from his bondage, blesses the name of Lincoln, as he sees his children and children's children growing up in the light of civilization and education and progress; the artisan in his thrifty home, the farmer looking over his laughing harvests. the patriotic citizen as he sees proudly waving the old flag, supreme and undisputed from ocean to ocean, from the Lakes to the Gulf— all bestow a benediction upon that noble American who made these blessings possible.

A grateful country cherishes his memory with an affection and admiration which deepen and strengthen as the years go by.

“For though his golden sun has set,
Its light shall linger, 'round us yet
Bright, radiant, blest.”

